

**Erica Hoagland**  
**...flying because she likes it.**

“Onward and Upward” is the tag line at the end of the email I am reading. The author is one of those rare people I meet that seem to be fueled by an inner fire that lights their path and spills onto some of us on the sidelines. I am corresponding with a pilot who I met at an airshow this spring.

I paused at the International Aerobatic Club’s tent during Sun n Fun to get out of the heat for a minute. There, amidst the highly-modified, testosterone-laden show machines is a woman wearing wrap around sunglasses above a brilliant smile. A stark contrast to her male colleagues’ aloof nature, she is easily approachable, a magnet for any passing show attendee. She stands between two Pitts Specials with opposing paint schemes, similar only in that both bear the same name in flowing script. I notice that she is wrapping up a conversation.

“...sign up for that aerobatic training! You won’t regret it!”

“Hi, my name’s Arthur, are you the ‘Erica Hoagland’ who owns these two aircraft?” I stick out my hand in introduction.

“Yes,” she grinned, “but I just sold the blue one.” I am surprised by the firmness of her grip.

The next hour flies by as Erica provides answers all my aerobatic questions as well as a synopsis of her flying life. Aerobatics is her avocation, but her job is Captain of a CJ1 for Citation Shares. She used to fly the Citation Excel, and her peers consider the CJ a downgrade, but to Erica it’s a blessing.

“It’s the Baby Jet! I liked the Excel, but the Citation 1 is much smaller and maneuverable, I can feel it fly.”

Erica’s enthusiasm for flying and life in general is contagious. I find myself asking questions just to hear the answers. It turns out that she went to Embry-Riddle and holds two degrees. A Bachelor of Science in Aerospace Studies (minor in Aviation Safety and Investigation). The second is a Master of Aeronautical Science. It does not surprise me that she graduated with distinction and a 4.0 GPA

You might have already assumed that she attained all her flight ratings in college, but you would be wrong. Learning to fly actually happened off-campus, in her spare time. You see, Erica’s practical side took over the moment she signed the student loan form, so her college focus was to become either a safety engineer for an airframe manufacturer or an NTSB accident investigator, getting a ‘real job’ as she calls it. The pilot ratings were pulled together on a shoestring, evenings and weekends.

OK, so she flies a jet for a living, and she got her ratings over time at FBOs. I am floored to learn that she has flown over 68 different types of aircraft, has owned 5 planes and raced at Reno. Impressive, given that she's only 31 years old. How does this happen?

Unlike many aviation luminaries, Erica was not born into a wealthy family, nor did she marry someone of means willing to sponsor her passion for flying. Instead, she grew up in Port Wing, Wisconsin; population 450. Her parents raised a brood of three girls by stretching Dad's annual mechanics' income of \$19K.

Dad fixed cars in a 4 slot garage he built next to the house. It was the family business. Mom did the books and worked on cars. The daughters cleaned all of the tools Dad had used that day and put them away. As they got older, his girls would learn all the basics: oil changes, brake jobs and tune ups.

"So, you shake hands like someone who is strong from twisting wrenches. Do you work on your own ship?" I inquire.

"Dad taught me how to *shake hands*! The *worst* is a floppy handshake from a guy. Floppy-that's what my sisters and I call it," she giggles. "Anyway yes, I work on my own planes because it's the only way I can afford them!"

Erica's first car was a Renault Alliance she and Dad purchased for \$500. Before she could drive it however, Erica had to weld on new muffler, rebuild the alternator and change the brakes herself. The day after she passed her driver's exam Erica went to work for her Dad driving the 60 miles to and from Duluth for auto parts.

She reminds me that life in this part of the US is an hour away from anything-a large grocery store, movie theater or Pizza shop.

"It was a pretty far drive to spend our money on the things that are really not important in the long run. People (there) work hard, and don't buy little frivolous things. Because most all of us in school did not have the newest games and toys it was okay, and we never really knew the difference. We all had clean, hand-me-down clothes and lots of meat and potatoes and... my family *always* went to Oshkosh!"

Erica has attended Oshkosh with her family almost every year since 1979. At first, Mom pulled the three girls around in a red wooden wagon with a Conestoga-esque shade. Later, the girls would ride their bikes and see the show on their own. No matter what the personal transportation mode, all would meet back at the family flatbed truck for air show time. On the truck bed propped on a lawn chair, with her ear attuned to the announcer on the radio, Erica's destiny caught up with her.

"I knew I *had to fly aerobatics* after watching the Christen Eagles perform when I was very young. They were my favorite. I remember how, at about age 14, I got to thinking that I was going to build myself a Christen Eagle someday. How cool was it to see them all fly a hammerhead in those pretty colored Eagles?!"

Erica tried to get her pilot's license in High School, but she had a very hard time finding VFR daylight hours. After school or work, she drove fifty miles to the flight school in Ashland, WS, but she couldn't get more than 1 hour flying in before sunset during the week. Additionally since she lived so far north, there were only two months of the year during which she could fly before dark. Two hours a week were about all she could commit to her logbook. Coupled with the daylight hour shortage, she had to work nights and weekends to raise money for flight lessons. The license would have to wait till later.

Trading the harsh cold of the Midwest for the balmy Florida winters Erica easily made the transition to college life. Here, she rubbed elbows with people from backgrounds different than her own. She marveled at the groups of women who were pulling together to help each other thru their careers. She saw advertisements for sororities, discussion groups and female support groups. Riddle's own sales collateral touted the school's success rate in working with women. Erica didn't understand this concept of women needing any help.

“Wisconsin people are hard working people. My girlfriends bail hay, take care of farms, change oil and work on their houses, inside and out. I don't think any of us realized that we *weren't supposed to* get our hands dirty until we had gone away to college and became adults.”

Consequently, Erica moved away from her small town devoid of any fear of failure due to her sex or her upbringing. At her core, she has never viewed the world as a place where women are treated differently than men. This thought has never entered her consciousness. Erica was helping to support her family even as a child, and was taught that working to get what you want in life is a natural activity. In the Hoagland family, children were fed a daily dose of self assurance and self reliance topped with a dollop of humility and compassion.

“I figure that if my Dad could raise us all on a small salary, I can support myself and scrape together enough money to own an airplane. I may have to scale back my spending and eat Mac n Cheese, but I'll get that airplane!”

Erica's childhood vision of the Christen Eagles flickered back to life halfway thru her Masters program. Up until that point, she was studying hard, had taken an Internship with the NTSB as an accident investigator assistant, but flying was not at the center of her life.

One day, Erica learned that Embry Riddle's Sport Aviation Club had acquired a Pitts S2B, and it called to her like a Siren. Her (then) boyfriend tried to discourage her by saying that they'd never let her fly the Pitts by herself, that it would be a waste of time.

“A few days later, I joined the club, gained the use of an extraordinary airplane and got rid of that boyfriend.”

She started taking acro lessons in the Pitts and after only 2.5 hours in that biplane, entered her first IAC competition, which she didn't win...she didn't place last either.

By the time graduation looped around, Erica was regularly flying a clipped wing Cub that she co-owned. Practicing aerobatics in the Cub and flying above Florida in her own ship reminded her of some advice she had gotten from a special high school teacher in Wisconsin.

He said, "Think of something that you would be willing to do *for free* on a Saturday, make *that* your life's work and you will never be sorry."

Erica abruptly altered her career path like a Pitts in a 6-G turn. She worked as a CFI, CFII, taught tailwheel and ferried airplanes, anything to keep flying and making money. Eventually, this activity expanded to flying for a commuter in the Caribbean, which got her the turbine time to apply at Citation Shares. One year, she took a summer "off" and towed gliders in Elmira, NY. While waiting for her next tow customer, Erica worked for her sailplane license with instructor certification. Oh, and she also managed to garner the Soaring Society of America's Silver Badge. Some *vacation*, eh?

After getting to know her, I now understand the text painted onto one of her Pitts' wingtips, it reads, "Do it because you like it".

"I put that on the wing, because people are always asking the same question of me: *Why?* *Why* race your biplane in Reno? *Why* fly aerobatics? *Why* fly in your spare time when you fly for a living? All those questions led me to the same answer-I do it all because I like it!"

Erica is not an aerobatic superstar-yet. She aspires to greatness in that arena and hopes to compete on the US Team. She is also working on her FAA low level waiver that will allow her to perform aerobatics for us at airshows.

I am confident that she will be very successful at all of it. Her attitude has carried her a long way in a short time. Erica is one of the reasons I like aviation-it offers me the opportunity to meet people who are totally dedicated to their dream. Spend a few minutes in this woman's presence and you too will experience her joy for a life spent flying. For Erica, it's a wonderful ride and she wants to take everyone along with her.

I close this story the way I started it, with a phrase that Grandma Hoagland used back in Port Wing. She is not a pilot, but Grandma comes from the same stock that propels Erica towards her dreams: **Onward and Upward!**

Arthur Treff is a freelance writer and photographer. He is a 2700 hour instrument rated pilot who someday hopes to fly aerobatics in the RV-8 he is building.